

The American Veteran, Edition 6, Part 3

Jim Benson, host: The Department of Veterans Affairs celebrates its 75th anniversary this year. As part of that celebration, we will bring you stories about VA's rich history of service to America's veterans. This month we visit the Fort Snelling National Cemetery and meet some very dedicated volunteers.

George John Wise Jr., veteran: For us, everyday is Memorial Day. These eyes have seen change, drastic changes.

Over the last 21 years we have served over 34,000 funerals here at Fort Snelling National Cemetery. From Monday through Friday we try to take care of our comrades, whether we knew them or not. We have one common link, we serve this country to the best of our ability.

My name is George John Wise Jr. I served a tour of duty with the United States Marine Corps right at the closing days of WWII. Today I'm serving as the squad leader for Friday here at Fort Snelling National Cemetery.

Veteran: My name is Kevin Burns and I served the United States Marine Corps.

Veteran: I'm Bill Gutenkapf, I served the United States Navy.

Veteran: I served in Korea.

Veteran: Served during the Vietnam War.

Veteran: I was in the Marine Corps in WWII and Korea.

Veteran: I was a gunner's mate 3rd class.

Veteran: Served on a submarine base.

Veteran: In the US Army for 2 years.

Veteran: Guadalcanal and Okinawa.

Veteran: North Africa, Italy, France and Germany

Wise: We are the Friday squad. We're not individuals. We **are** the Friday squad.

Veteran: We are a group of people.

Veteran: Who are all veterans of each of the military services.

Veteran: And it is strictly a volunteer organization.

Veteran: To honor the veteran who has served for his last time.

Veteran: We don't do it for the notoriety; we do it because we felt that it has to be done.

Wise: The Memorial Rifle Squad is the oldest rifle squad of its style in the United States. We started on June the 19th of 1979 with 6 of us. We had 2 funerals. Today, we have 120 men on this rifle squad. We average 10, 12 funerals a day. Of the original 6 member rifle squad, I was the youngest. And I am the last survivor.

The change of weather has a great deal to do with older people. And we feel the crunch of that here. The average age of the Memorial Rifle Squad right at this time is 77.4. The majority of us are World War Two veterans. And that gives us something to think about because of the fact, on a nationwide basis, World War Two veterans are dying at a thousand a day. It's not a thousand a week, not a thousand a month, but a thousand a day. So, it doesn't give us much time to do what we're supposed to be doing and that's taking care of one another.

(Video: Rifle salute): Ready... Aim... Fire!....Aim...Fire!...Aim...Fire!

Wise: What we are, are relics of the past, another paragraph in the history books. We are a dying breed.

How do I hope to be remembered? Well, I just found out I'm going to become a great grandfather. I hope, I really hope, 20 years from now, my great grandson can come out and say, George Wise, my great grandfather, helped start this, kept it going, right here, on the Friday Squad.

Benson: To find out if you qualify for burial at a national cemetery. You can log onto www.cem.va.gov

That takes care of another edition of The American Veteran. It is our honor to bring you these stories each month. If you would like to contact the Department of Veterans Affairs regarding our show or for any other reason here are a few ways to do so.

On the internet at www.va.gov or by phone at 1-800-827-1000 or visit your nearest Vet Center.

For the Department of Veterans Affairs I'm Jim Benson.

See you next time.

Video Credits: Tom Aviler, WCCO-TV-4.

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